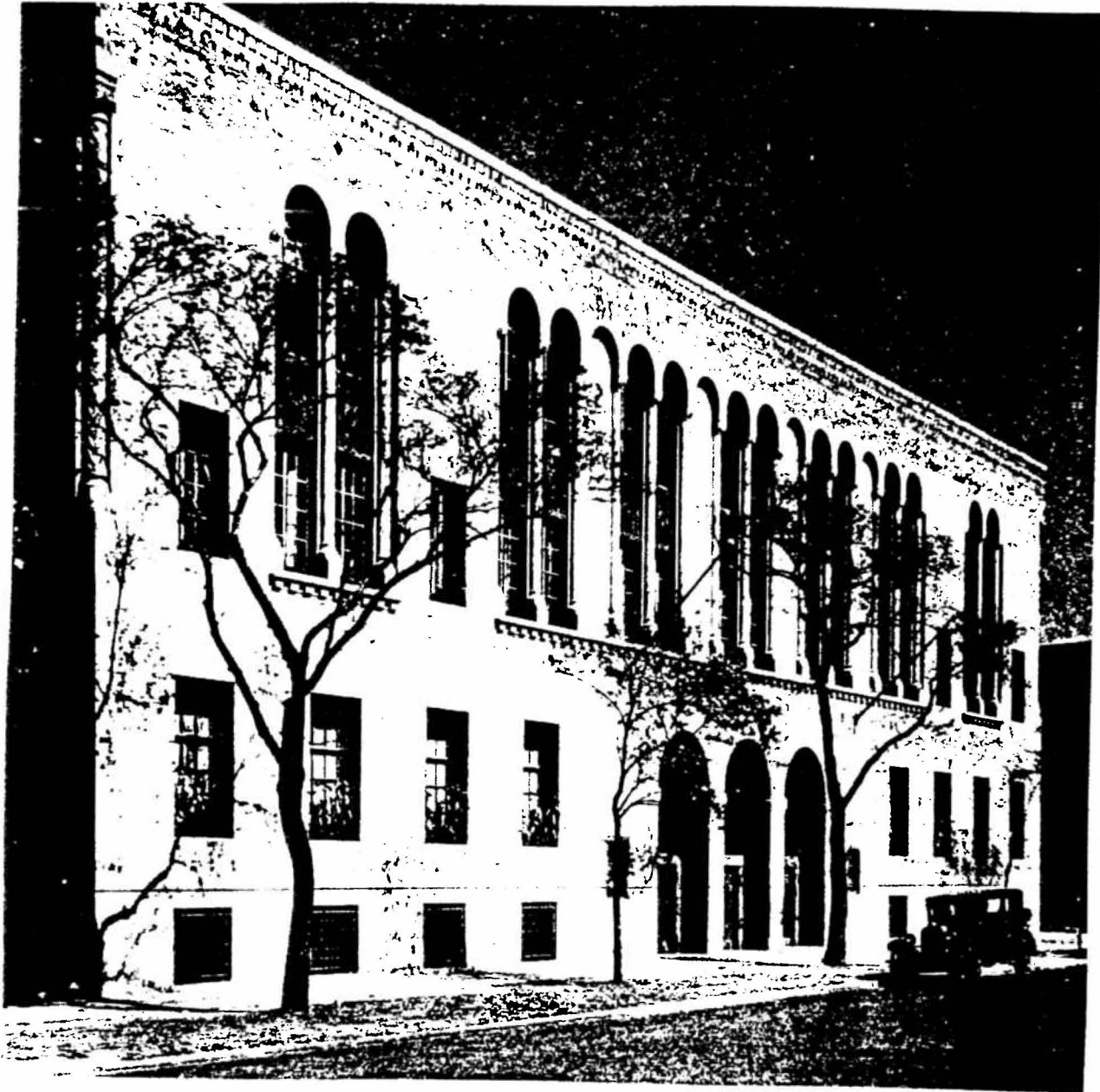


PRELIMINARY SUMMARY OF INFORMATION



Jewish People's Institute

3500 W. Douglas Blvd.

Submitted to the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in January 2000



CITY OF CHICAGO
Richard M. Daley, Mayor

Department of Planning and Development
Christopher R. Hill, Commissioner

Jewish People's Institute

(also known as the Lawndale Community Academy)

3500 W. Douglas Blvd.

Date: 1927

Architect: Klaber & Grunsfeld

The Jewish People's Institute was the cultural nucleus of Chicago's North Lawndale, one of the nation's largest Jewish communities during the first half of the 20th century. Its classrooms, auditorium, and athletic facilities provided a rich variety of social, sports, recreational, and arts activities for generations of children and teenagers, as well as adult education.

The building's distinctive, Byzantine-inspired architecture reinforced the Middle-Eastern origins of Judaism, while the structure's prominent site along the broad, landscaped Douglas Boulevard—the so-called “Lake Shore Drive of the West Side”—reinforced the significance of the institution itself.

Building Description

The Jewish People's Institute (JPI) building is located on the northwest corner of Douglas Boulevard and St. Louis Avenue. Its three stories are set on a raised limestone base. The exterior walls are buff-colored brick with decorative accents in grey limestone and polished marble.

The design of JPI's two principal elevations reflect the building's two distinct functions. The 147-foot-long south elevation (facing Douglas Boulevard) is symmetrical in its composition, which parallels the orderly layout of the classrooms and meetings rooms in this portion of the building. Inside the entrance, a wide stair hall leads to a central lobby.

In contrast, the 188-foot eastern elevation (facing St. Louis Avenue) is less formal in its appearance, reflecting in its architecture the series of more active public uses that are oriented to its entrance lobby, including an auditorium, gymnasium, natatorium, and rooftop garden.

The scale of the JPI is in keeping with other structures located along this section of Douglas Boulevard, between Kedzie Avenue (3200 W) and Independence Blvd. (3800 W). They are primarily two- and three-flats, interspersed with larger courtyard apartments, institutional buildings, and synagogues. Most of these structures date from the 1890s through 1930s.

The JPI is the westernmost building in a group of three institutional structures that now comprise the Chicago Board of Education's Lawndale Community Academy. The center building, at the northeast corner of Douglas and St. Louis, is the former Hebrew Theological College (built 1922-23). Directly behind it is the Hebrew Theological Library (built 1929-33), and to the east is a glass-and-steel structure, constructed circa 1965 for the Lawndale Community Academy.

[As part of the research for this preliminary summary of information, staff reviewed the two center buildings for possible inclusion in this proposed landmark designation. Based on its research, however, staff did not feel that the history and architecture of these two structures—which have been vacant since 1960—met the minimum two-criteria requirement for consideration by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks. Both buildings were designed by Lowenberg & Lowenberg in a Classical Revival style. The College building has terra cotta decoration. Neither interior is intact.]

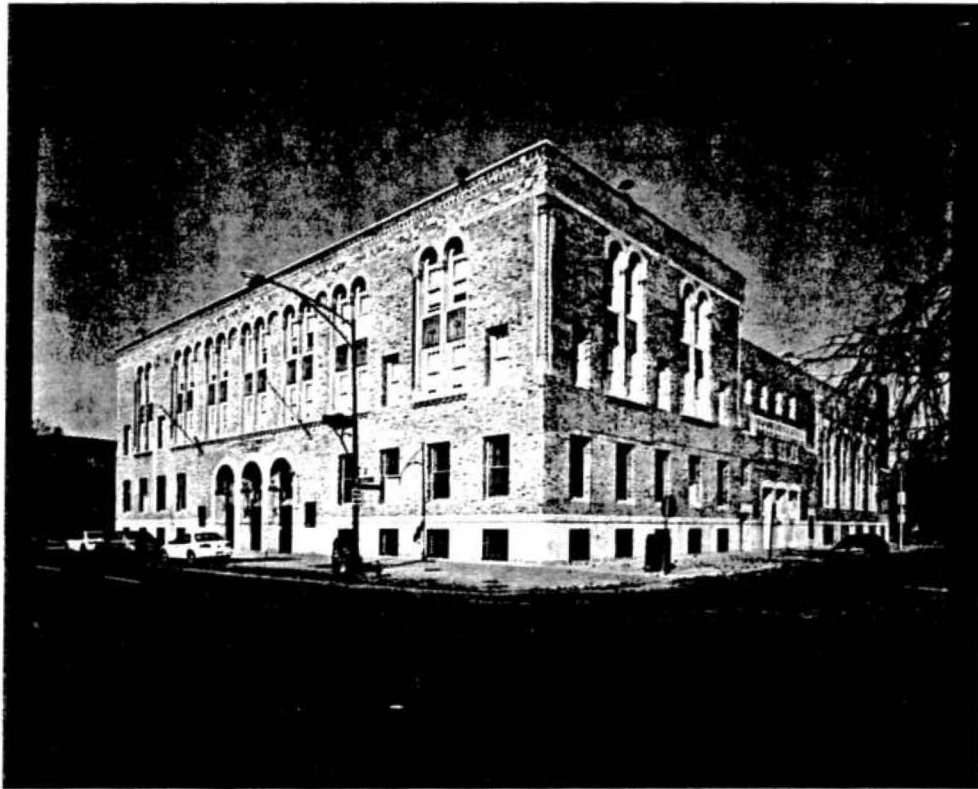
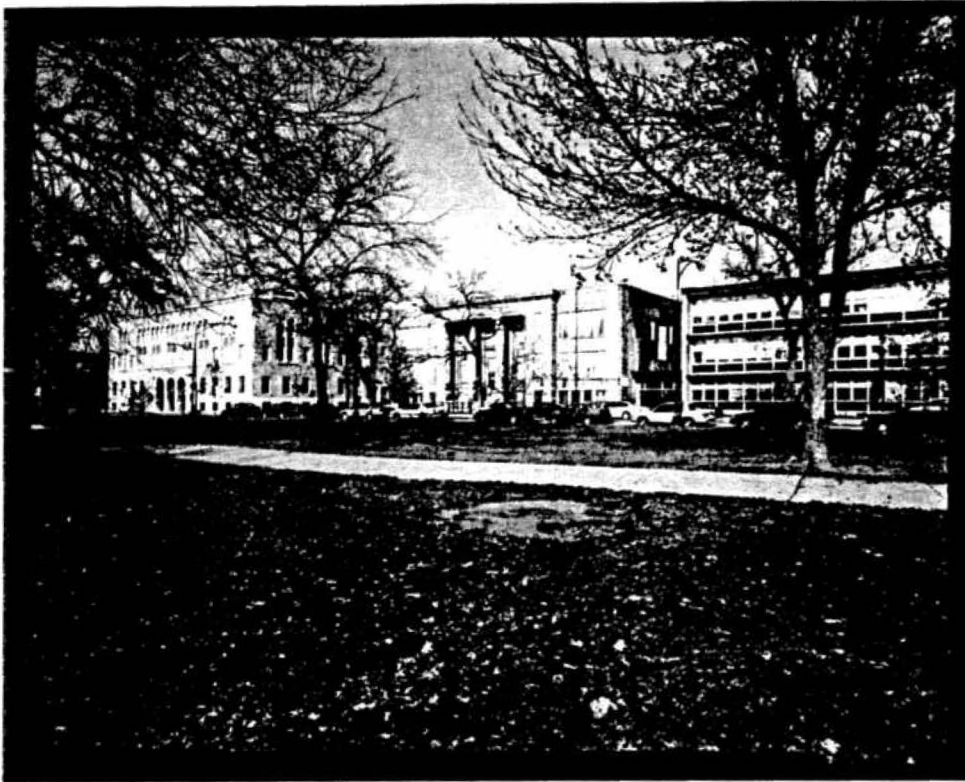
The firm of Klaber & Grunsfeld—Eugene H. Klaber and Ernest A. Grunsfeld, Jr., partners—designed the Jewish People's Institute building. The building permit was issued on April 15, 1926; the city's final inspection report is dated August 10, 1927. The cost of construction was \$900,000, according to an article in the *Chicago Tribune*.

The building was owned and occupied by JPI until 1955, when it was purchased by the Chicago Board of Education. In 1978, the building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Criteria for Designation

According to the Municipal Code of Chicago (Sec. 2-120-620 and -630), the Commission on Chicago Landmarks has the authority to make a preliminary recommendation of landmark designation for a building, structure, or district if the Commission determines it meets two or more of the stated "criteria for landmark designation," as well as possesses a significant degree of its historic design integrity.

The following should be considered by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in determining whether to make a preliminary recommendation that the Jewish People's Institute be designated as a Chicago Landmark.



The Jewish People's Institute (above) is the westernmost structure of a group of three buildings (top) facing Douglas Boulevard that now comprise the Lawndale Community Academy.

Criterion 1: Critical Part of City's Heritage

Its value as an example of the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social or other aspect of the heritage of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States

For almost a century, the Jewish People's Institute (now called the Jewish Community Centers) has been a vital force in the city's Jewish culture, where it has promoted a wide range of social services and educational, recreational, and vocational programs.

In 1903, the organization was founded as the Chicago Hebrew Institute at 1125 Blue Island Ave. (demolished), on the city's Near West Side, to address the needs of Eastern European Jewish immigrants who wanted to practice their cultural and religious customs while at the same time integrating into American society.

In many ways, the institute operated as a traditional settlement house, similar to Jane Addams' Hull House (1889) or the Northwestern University Settlement House (1901). However, according to a 1960 journal article ("This Was North Lawndale" in *Jewish Social Studies*), there was an important distinction: "The JPI grew out of the needs and aspirations of its founders and clientele rather than having been imposed upon the immigrant community from the outside."

One of the founders of the JPI, attorney Nathan Kaplan, expressed its mission thusly:

The younger generation speaking English and mixing with English-speaking peoples loses its interest in things Jewish, and the older people speaking nothing but their native language live always in a foreign atmosphere. We hope the Institute will give both an opportunity to meet on common ground and so, while making the Orthodox tolerant and the younger element better fitted to sympathize, preserve all that is best in the race and its faith.

In 1908, in order to meet increasing demand for services, the JPI bought the building and grounds of the former Sacred Heart Convent, 1258 W. Taylor St. (demolished), converting the site into playgrounds, a gymnasium, classrooms, assembly halls, a library, and a synagogue.

According to *The Jews of Chicago* (1996): "The institute's constructive programs offered something for almost everyone in a period when people's activities were generally limited to the neighborhood." In addition to providing occupational training and evening high school classes for adults, the institute sponsored numerous picnics, festivals, dances, concerts, movies, plays, and sport events. It even initiated a summer camp in Antioch, Illinois, called Camp CHI (for Chicago Hebrew Institute). The steady growth of the organization's programs

throughout the first two decades of the 20th century increased its influence on Jewish culture in Chicago.

In 1922, the organization changed its name to the Jewish People's Institute and, five years later, following the movement of the city's Jewish population, the institute moved from the Near West Side to a newly constructed building at the corner of Douglas Boulevard and St. Louis Avenue in the rapidly growing North Lawndale community.

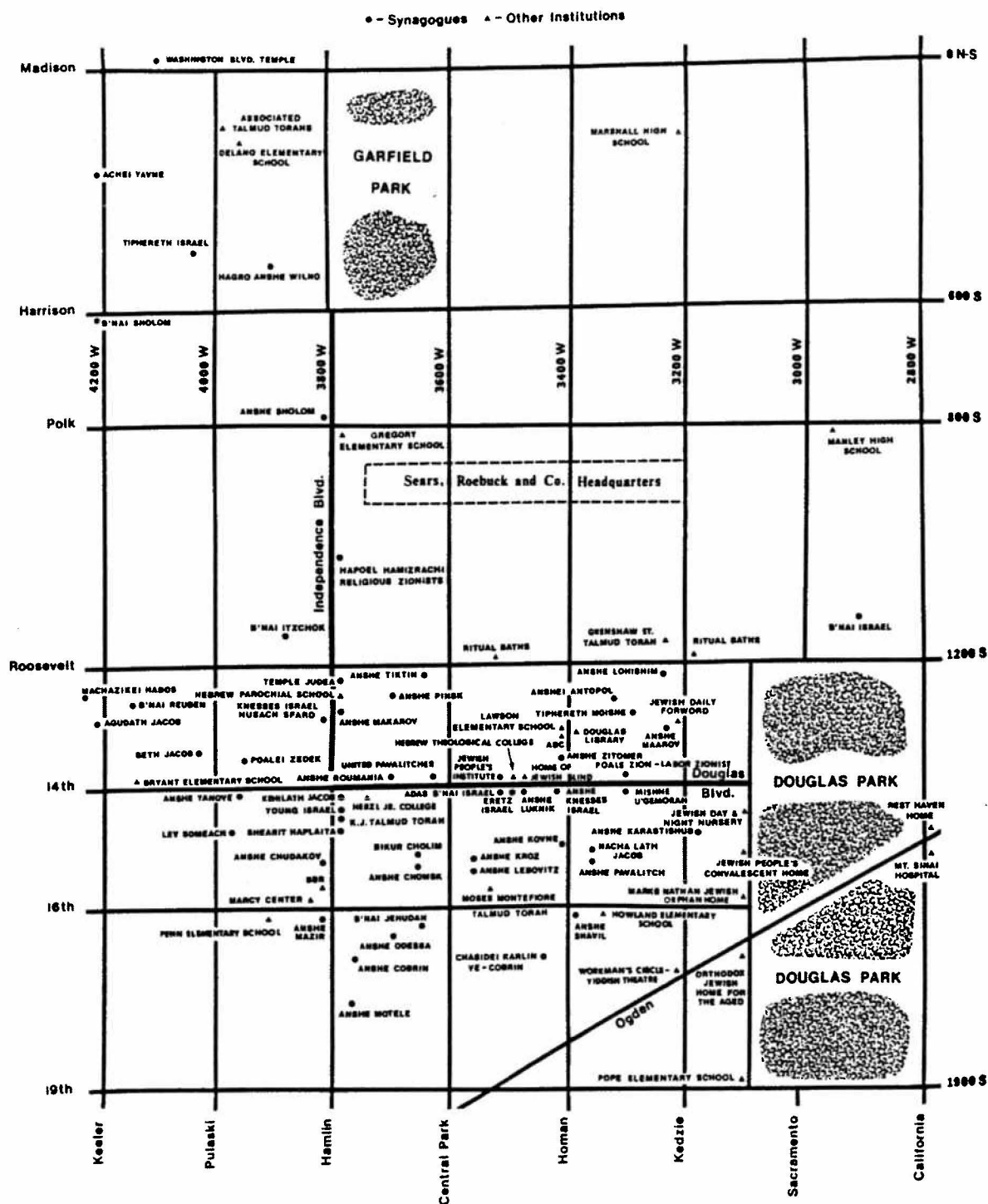
During the 1940s, the movement of Jews to other city neighborhoods caused the institute to open additional facilities. In 1941, it built the Max Straus Center in Albany Park, followed by centers in Hyde Park (1946) and Rogers Park (1948). The institute changed its name in 1946 to the Jewish Community Centers, but it retained its headquarters on Douglas Boulevard, which was renamed the Jewish People's Institute/West Side Center.

The organization remains in operation today, and continues its distinguished record of responding to societal needs, ranging from the care of senior citizens to assistance for the economically disadvantaged in Uptown.

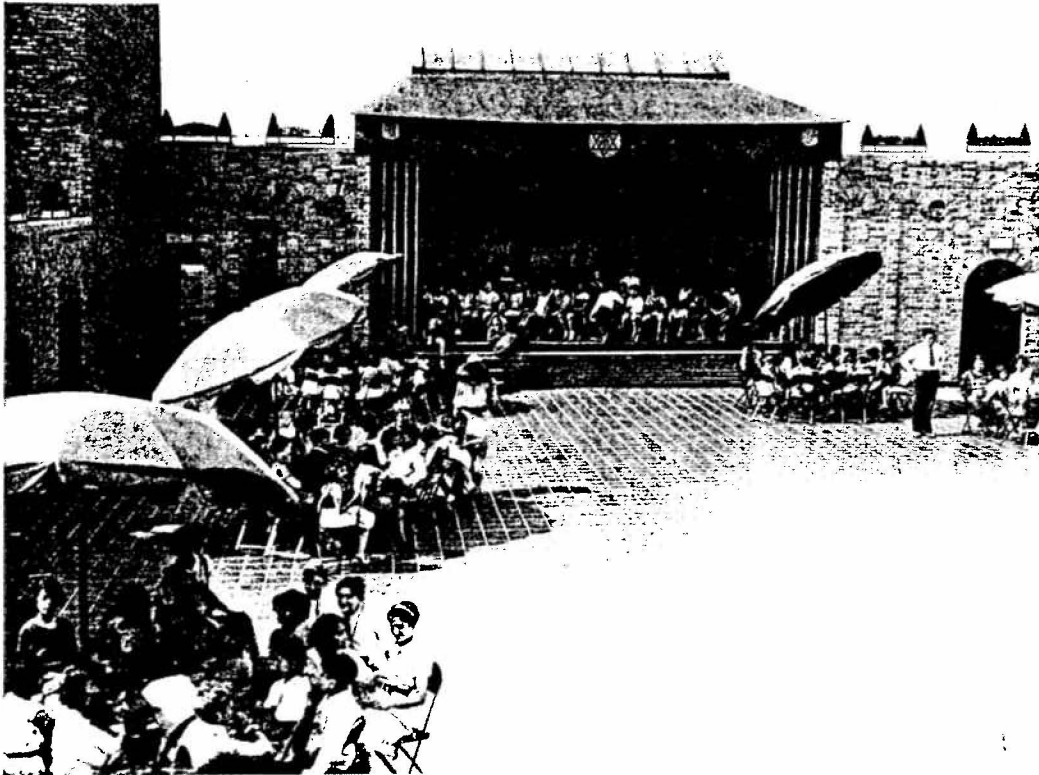
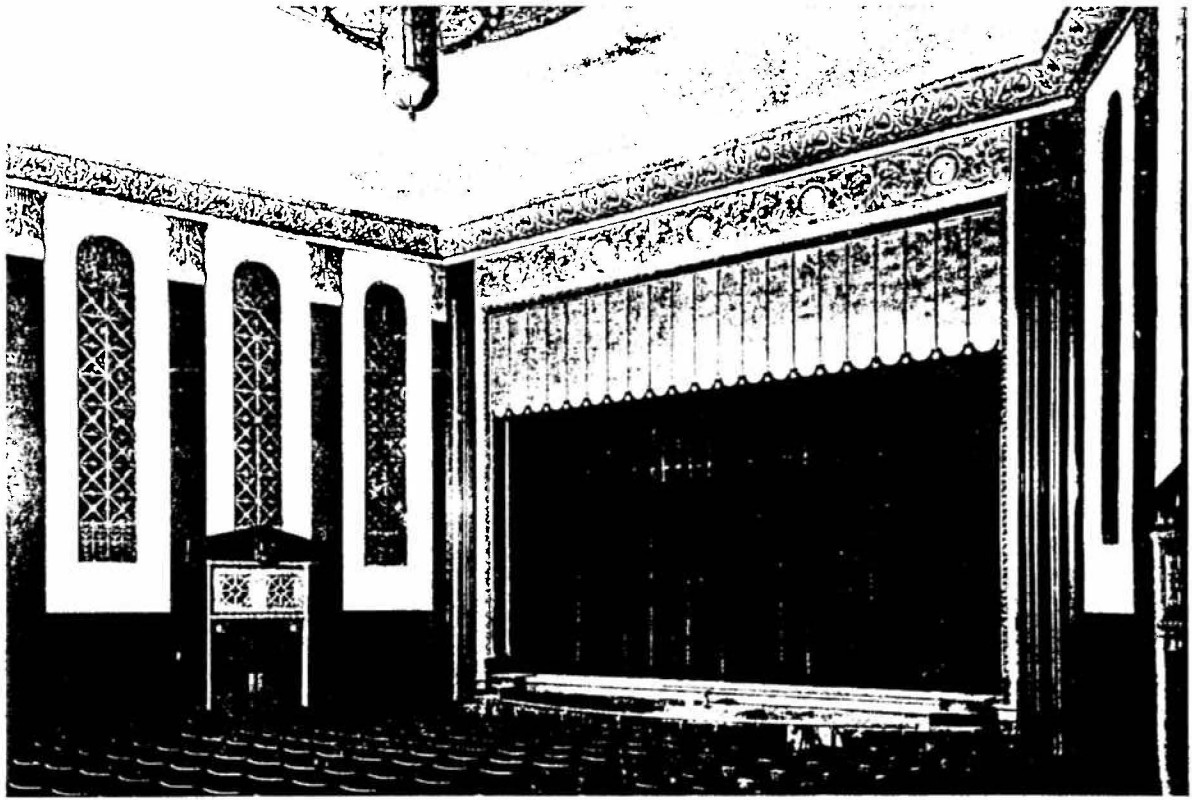
The Jewish People's Institute building on Douglas Boulevard was one of the foremost centers of Jewish culture in North Lawndale, which was the largest Jewish community in Chicago—and one of the largest in the nation—during the first half of the 20th century.

Owing to waves of immigration primarily from Eastern Europe, at the turn of the last century Chicago had the third largest Jewish population of any city in the world. Initial settlement occurred on the Near West Side, around Maxwell Street. However, during the first decades of the 20th century, there was a rapid exodus—both of population and institutions—to the more prosperous North Lawndale community, bounded roughly by Arthington Street (900 S), Cermak Road (2200 S), Rockwell Street (2600 W), and Kolmar Avenue (4500 W).

In 1930, more than 110,000 Jews lived in the North and South Lawndale communities combined. Their preeminence as a Jewish neighborhood was summarized in *The Jews of Chicago*: “Whether they live in Chicago or its suburbs, many Jews can trace their roots to the greater Lawndale area, for during much of the first half of the 20th century, as many as 40 percent of the Jews of Chicago lived there.”



This map from *The Jews of Chicago* shows the location of the dozens of Jewish religious, educational, and cultural institutions that dotted the North Lawndale community in 1948. The Jewish People's Institute is located near the center of the map along 14th Street/Douglas Boulevard.



The Jewish People's Institute was the center of community-wide activities in North Lawndale in the early part of the 20th century, owing to its 800-seat auditorium (top, in 1927) and rooftop terrace (above, c.1930).

The heart of North Lawndale was the L-shaped spine formed by Douglas and Independence boulevards, where most of the community's prominent institutions and many of its 30 synagogues were located. Historian Irving Cutler (author of *The Jews of Chicago*) notes that residents proudly referred to Douglas Boulevard as the "Lake Shore Drive of the West Side."

The Jewish People's Institute played a major role in the community. The building housed an 800-seat theater, library, gymnasium, swimming pool, lounges, and a cafeteria, as well as numerous classrooms and meeting rooms. Probably the most memorable feature was the rooftop terrace, where dances were held regularly during the summer.

JPI also hosted numerous clubs, sponsored several lectures a week, and offered vocational training for adults. It maintained its own classical orchestra and theater group, and taught classes in art, drama, and music. It also held classes in English and citizenship, and maintained a naturalization bureau for those qualified for citizenship. Among the building's other facilities were: a billiard room, barber shop, chemistry and physics laboratories, art and drafting room, bookstore, rehearsal space, and a commercial school with rooms for stenography, bookkeeping, and typing courses.

According to a JPI study of one typical week in 1933, more than 2,700 people attended 111 club meetings, 3,200 attended classes, 3,900 used one of its recreational facilities, and 1,900 visited the library. A *Chicago Tribune* article of the time noted that "literally the entire Lawndale community uses the institute."

JPI functioned as a true community center, providing a space where all residents could mingle. Among the well-known individuals who used the facility were author Nelson Algren, bookseller Stuart Brent, Judge Abraham Lincoln Marovitz, and retailer Maurice Goldblatt. Leo Rosten, who wrote the 1937 bestselling novel, *The Education of Hyman Kaplan*, based it on his experiences teaching at the Jewish People's Institute.

Criterion 4: Important Architecture

Its exemplification of an architectural type or style distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design, detail, materials or craftsmanship.

The Jewish People's Institute is an excellent and rare example of Byzantine-style architecture. It is also the city's best secular example of a Byzantine design.

In designing the Jewish People's Institute, the architects (Klaber & Grunsfeld) employed elements of Byzantine architecture dating to the 4th century, which developed after the

Emperor Constantine moved his capital from Rome to Byzantium, Turkey, in 324 A.D. The Hagia Sophia at Constantinople is the most lavish example of Byzantine architecture, but numerous other churches were built in the style throughout Europe. The style's distinctive elements are: series of semi-circular arches, unusual tapered column capitals with block forms and foliated decoration, and rich ornamentation in mosaics and stone carvings.

During the 1920s, Byzantine-influenced architecture became the *au courant* style for synagogues in the U.S., largely due to its use in Chicago. Architect Alfred S. Alschuler is widely credited with adapting this ancient style to contemporary uses through his eye-catching 1924 design for the K.A.M Isaiah Israel Temple, 1100 E. Hyde Park Blvd., which is a designated Chicago Landmark.

In a 1924 article from *The American Architect*, Alschuler explained that his inspiration for the use of Byzantine-style architecture was based on photographs of "fragments from an ancient Hebrew temple recently unearthed in Palestine...that closely resemble those used in the architecture of the Byzantine period." Although the style is generally associated with Christian architecture, Alschuler concluded that the designs of Jewish temples during the reign of Constantine also employed the style.

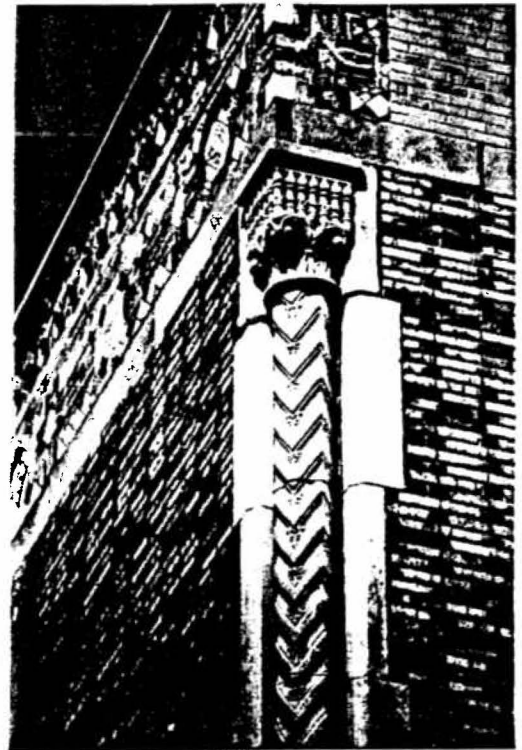
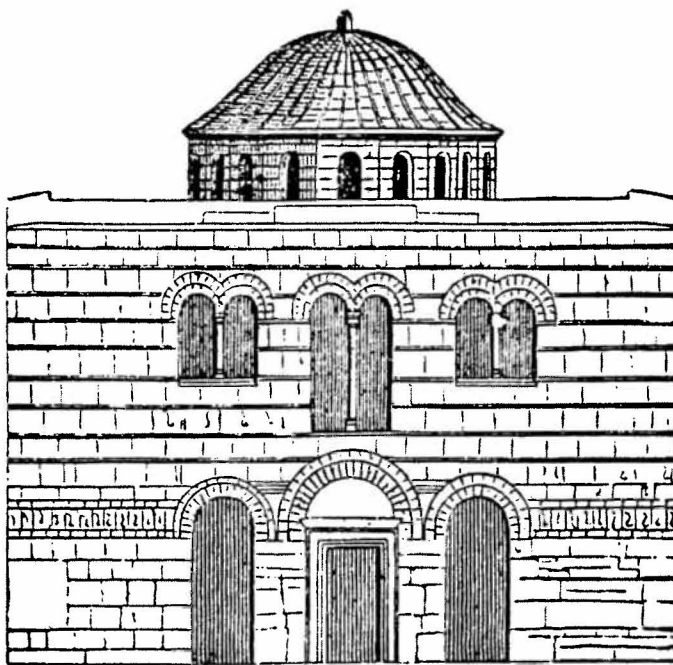
The *Chicago Historic Resources Survey* identifies less than a dozen noteworthy examples of this style in the city. Most are synagogues, and all were designed between 1920 and 1932. The JPI is considered to be the city's best example of a secular Byzantine design, providing a distinct and original interpretation of the style.

Round arches, elaborately carved columns, and rich decorative detailing effectively evoke Judaism's Middle-Eastern origins. An arcaded entrance dominates the symmetrically arranged elevation facing Douglas Boulevard. The window openings at the basement and first floor levels are sharply cut into the wall plane, giving them a minimalist "punched-in" character. In contrast, the window treatment for the upper stories is much more ornamental. There, the windows are paired and set off by a series of two-story, semi-circular arches, which are defined by stone columns with lavishly ornamented, tapered block capitals. Copper spandrels between the second and third stories are also embellished with decorative medallions.

The column capitals and other artistic elements incorporate a variety of historical symbols of Judaism, such as the star of David, the Menorah, and the Ten Commandments. The engaged corner columns have elaborate chevron patterns and are topped with foliated capitals featuring a Menorah on each side.



One of the most distinctive features of the Jewish People's Institute is its series of round-arched window and door openings on the Douglas Boulevard elevation. This photo dates to 1927, at the time of the building's dedication.



The Byzantine style of architecture is characterized by elaborate decoration, such as the polished marble stone cornice, carved masonry columns, and round arches found on the Jewish People's Institute. The drawing is of a Byzantine-style church in Athens from the 4th century.

The Byzantine style of the JPI building skillfully blends historic design elements with a starkly geometric, modern form. Overall, the details are more subdued than they are when used on synagogues. Given JPI's religious tradition and its progressive social service functions, Klaber & Grunsfeld's interpretation of the Byzantine style for this building's design is particularly appropriate and original.

The building's details are distinguished by their high level of craftsmanship, both of carved masonry and decorative brick- and marble-work.

The buff-colored brick walls have an artistic appearance, stemming from their decorative "Flemish double-stretcher" bonding pattern. The corners of the Douglas Boulevard facade (south) are punctuated with two-story columns. The top of the building is elaborately embellished with patterned brickwork and an unusual inlay of polished stone that resembles a mother-of-pearl finish. Above this is a band of angled bricks that is capped with a limestone coping.

The east (Douglas Boulevard) and west facades are finished with the same materials and craftsmanship as the south elevation, but without its formal symmetry and historical ornament. Their minimalist design—e.g., the restrained use of ornament; the continuous, unmodulated wall surfaces; and functional window arrangement sharply cut into the wall plane—exhibits the planar, geometric character of the then-modern architecture of the period.

This high level of craftsmanship extends to the interior. The stair halls and lobbies that lead from the entrances facing Douglas Boulevard and St. Louis Avenue are finished with coffered plaster ceilings and terrazzo floors featuring a geometric pattern. The other prominent interior feature is the 800-seat auditorium, which is ornamented with stylized Judaic and Moorish motifs. The theater has permanent seating for 556 on the main floor, while the balcony accommodates an additional 244. The large stage is located beneath a decorative proscenium opening and there is an abundance of ornament in the ceiling friezes, fire curtain, proscenium, and doorways.

The Jewish People's Institute is one of the best works of the architectural firm of Klaber & Grunsfeld. One of the firm's partners, Ernest Grunsfeld, is best known as the designer of the Adler Planetarium.

Born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Ernest Alton Grunsfeld, Jr. (1897-1970) graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of technology in 1918. Between 1920 and 1922, he attended the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris and the American Academy in Rome. He settled in Chicago, where he established a partnership

in 1924 with Eugene Henry Klaber (1883-1971), a native of New York City, who received his architecture degree from Columbia University in 1906.

The Jewish People's Institute was the first major commission for Klaber & Grunsfeld. The firm's selection was influenced, no doubt, by the fact that Grunsfeld's wife, Mary Jane Loeb, was the daughter of Jacob Loeb, a former president of the Jewish People's Institute. Another notable surviving work of the firm is the Whitehall Hotel, 105 E. Delaware Pl. (1928).

In 1929, Grunsfeld established a private practice. His first major commission was the Adler Planetarium, whose planar, geometric design won a Gold Medal from the American Institute of Architects in 1930. The design was later praised by critic Carl Condit as a "classic in the modern idiom."

Other prominent buildings by Grunsfeld from this period include: the Stephen A. Douglas Library, 3353 W. 13th St. (1930), the WGN Radio Studios, 401 N. Michigan Ave. (1935), the Michigan Boulevard Garden Apartments., 54 E. 47th St. (1934), and the Sinai Temple, 5350 South Shore Dr. (1939; demolished). The innovative design of the apartments, which featured five-story buildings centered on a large landscaped courtyard, led to Grunsfeld's selection as part of a team that was chosen to design several early public housing projects, including the Jane Addams, Cabrini, and Trumbull homes.

From 1939 to 1946, Grunsfeld was a partner of Grunsfeld, Yerkes and Koenig. In 1946, he joined the partnership of Friedman, Alschuler, Sincere and Ernest A. Grunsfeld, where he remained until 1955. He was a member of the Illinois Housing Commission and he established a fund that sponsored an architectural student exchange program between the U.S. and France. Among his honors was the Chevalier Legion of Honor from the French government.

Grunsfeld's former partner, Eugene Klaber, worked as an architect for the Public Works Administration and the Federal Housing Authority in Washington, D.C., from 1933 to 1942. He later taught at Columbia University and was a private housing and planning consultant.

Integrity

The integrity of the proposed landmark must be preserved in light of its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, and ability to express its historic community, architectural or aesthetic interest or value.

The Jewish People's Institute retains its historic integrity to a high degree. The only notable changes from its original appearance are:

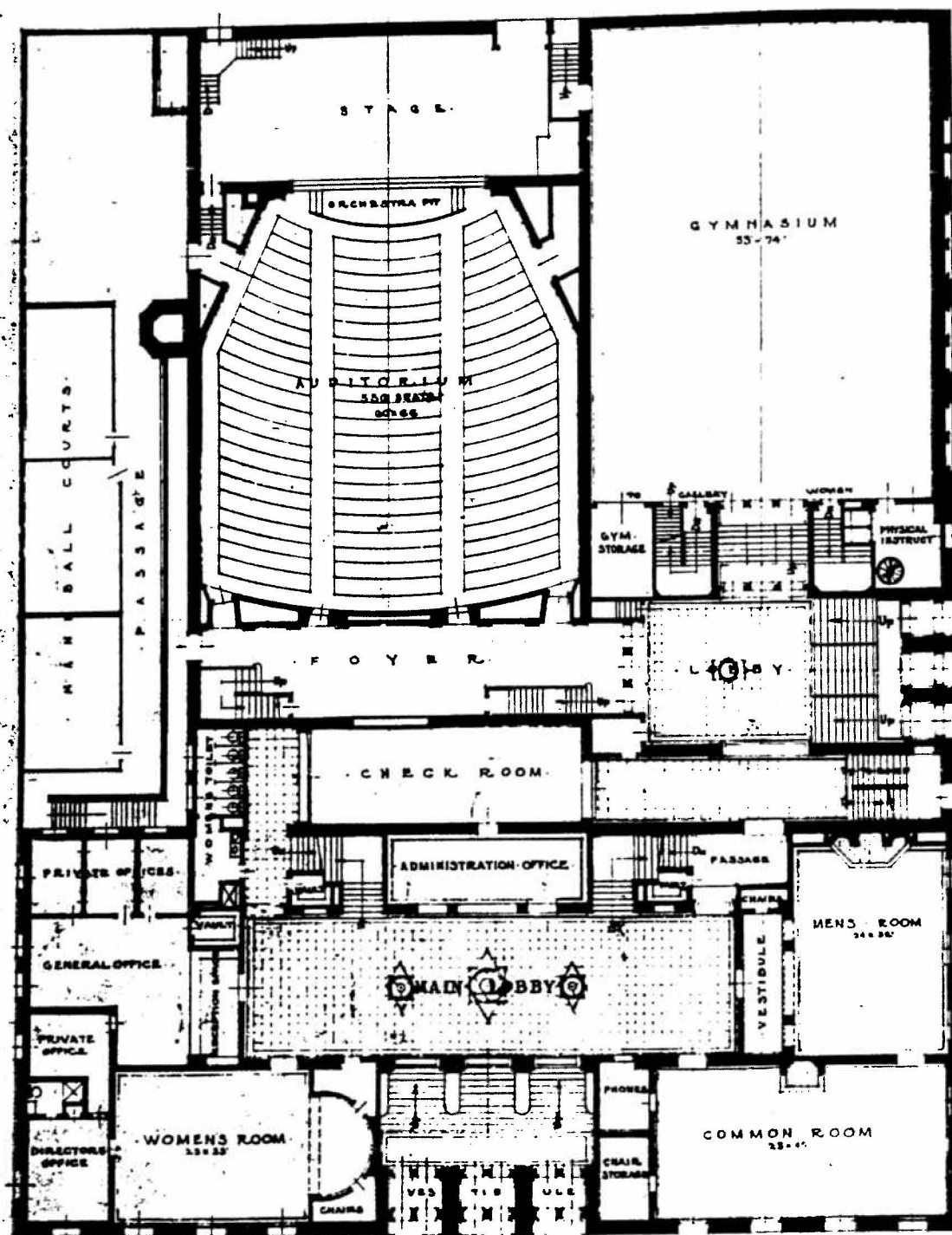
- The installation of metal security doors in the Douglas Avenue entrance.
- The replacement of the original windows with aluminum- and vinyl-frame sash windows on the first through third floors. Each of the openings on the first floor appear to have originally featured pairs of wood-framed casement windows (each one divided into six panes), with a fixed, four-pane transom above. The second and third floor openings were metal casements, divided into eight lights.
- Installation of metal covers over the recessed display cases on either side of the Douglas Boulevard entry.
- Removal of the original decorative stone and brickwork of the cornice area on the east side of the building.

Significant Historical and Architectural Features

Whenever a building is under consideration for landmark designation, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks is required to identify the "significant historical and architectural features" of the property. This is done to enable the owners and the public to understand which elements are considered most important to preserve the character of the proposed landmark.

Based on its evaluation of the Jewish People's Institute, the Commission staff recommends that the significant historical and architectural features be identified as the:

- south and east exterior elevations;
- decorative brick portions of the west exterior elevation;
- all building rooflines and the rooftop terrace;
- interior stairhalls leading from the Douglas Boulevard and St. Louis Avenue entrances, and first-floor lobby areas (see accompanying floor plan); and the
- auditorium.



The original first floor plan of the Jewish People's Institute, showing the location of the two entrance stairways and lobbies, facing Douglas Boulevard (bottom) and St. Louis Avenue (right), as well as the auditorium and gymnasium.

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Acknowledgments

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Illustrations

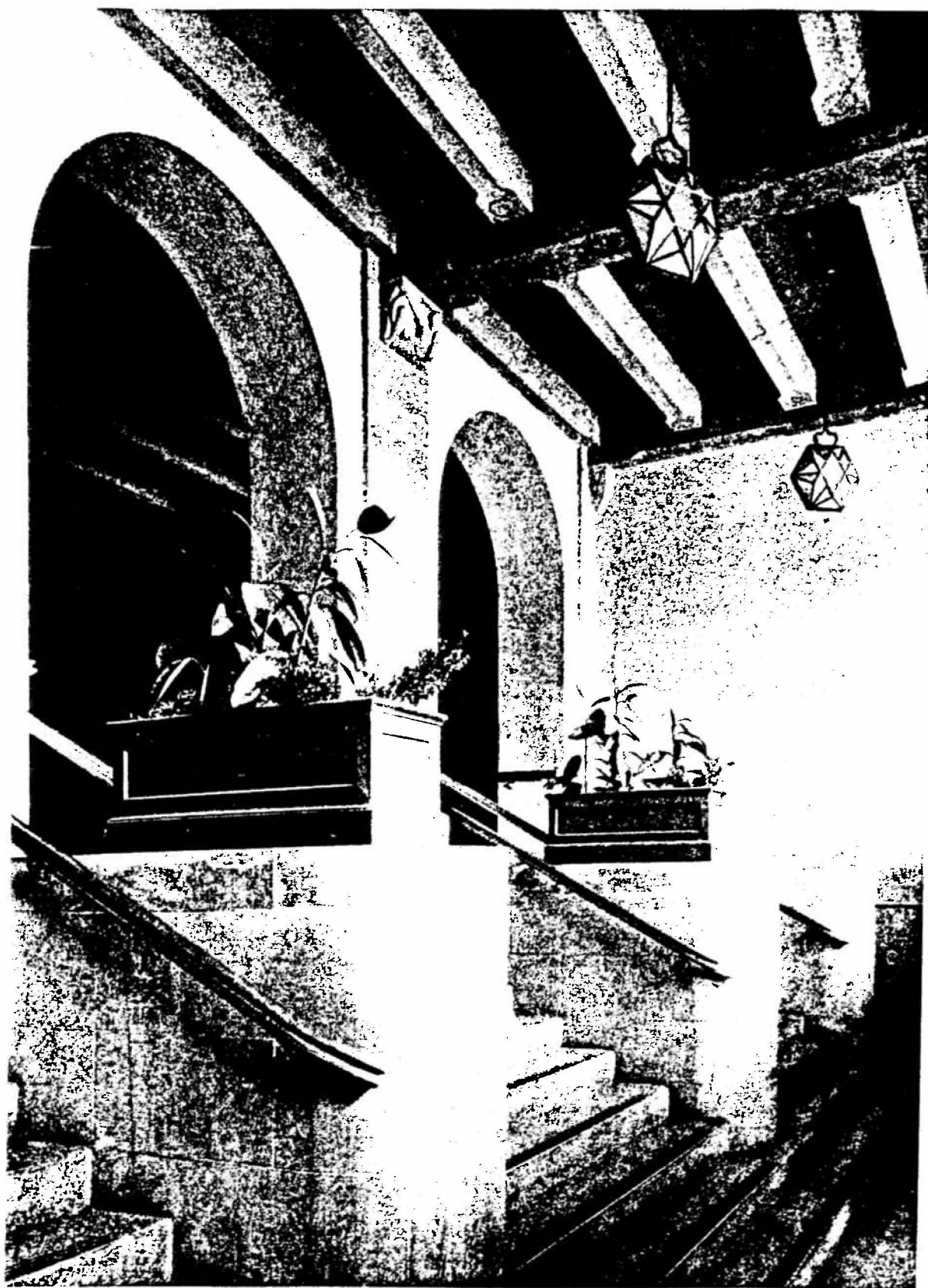
The Architect (Dec. 1928), front cover, pp. 7 (top), 10, 15, inside back cover.

Ron Gordon, Photographer, for the Commission on Chicago Landmarks, pp. 3.

The Jews of Chicago, pp. 6, 7 (bot.).

Chicago Historic Resources Survey, p. 11.

Dictionary of Design and Decoration (1973), p. 11 (drawing).



The Douglas Boulevard entrance hall to the Jewish People's Institute at the time of the building's opening in 1927. The hall is largely intact except for the ceiling, which was altered following a fire in the 1970s.

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